

## HANS URS VON BALTHASAR SOCIETY

Topic: Balthasar and American Catholic Social Ethics  
Convener: David L. Schindler, John Paul II Institute  
Presenter: Michael Baxter, University of Notre Dame  
Respondent: Joseph Komonchak, Catholic University of America

Focusing on a chapter in *We Hold These Truths* entitled "Is It Basket Weaving?" Baxter argued that the distinction John Courtney Murray posits between eschatological and incarnational humanism sets up false alternatives and should be rejected in favor of a single Christian humanism that provides a more critical stance in regard to the United States of America. The argument came in three parts. Part one showed how Murray's account is not detached and impartial, as he implies, but favors incarnational over eschatological humanism. Part two drew on the work of Athanasius, author of *On the Incarnation* and *Life of Anthony*, to argue that the construction of these two forms of Christian humanisms is theologically unwarranted and should be replaced with a conception of eschatology that entails social transformation and of the incarnation that entails divine judgment. Part three showed how Murray's preference for incarnational humanism lends itself to an uncritical embrace of the economic and political order of the United States. In addition, it argued that the approach indicated by Paul Hanly Furfey provides resources for a more discerning critical approach to whatever may be the existing social order. In conclusion, Baxter's paper argued that Murray's distinction has had a deep influence on the discourse of Catholic social ethics in the United States, in that both liberal and neoconservative social ethicists identify themselves as incarnational humanists and thus fall into a similarly uncritical posture toward U.S. economy and polity.

Agreeing that Murray's essay oversimplifies the typologies, particularly in its description of eschatological humanism, and that an integral Christian humanism has to retain both doctrinal emphases, Komonchak first offered some clarifications about Murray's concern, particularly with regard to American politics. Murray was chiefly concerned to legitimize the modern differentiation of a limited state, particularly in religious matters. He devoted most of his reply to a critique of Paul Hanly Furfey's position, the basis of which he traced to Furfey's differentiation of "three types of society": the materialistic/positivistic one that he thought largely characterized America; the noetic society that might be built on a richer and deeper epistemology; and the "pistic" society built on Catholic faith and motivated by supernatural charity. Furfey thought a noetic society impossible given humanity's fallen nature. He was left, then, with a twofold distinction between materialism and Catholic faith, and any contribution from noesis was ignored. Murray, on the other hand, was optimistic that natural law might provide something to the resolution of social questions. Komonchak ended with a brief suggestion that Baxter's emphasis on the works of mercy had to be supplemented by acknowledging the works of wisdom and intelligence in constructing a Catholic social ethic.

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